

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS: A STRATEGY OF CONDITIONAL
ENGAGEMENT**

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Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>					
1. REPORT DATE 2004	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2004 to 00-00-2004			
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The North Korean Nuclear Crisis: A Strategy of Conditional Engagement			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	5b. GRANT NUMBER	
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER	5e. TASK NUMBER	
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The original document contains color images.					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: a. REPORT b. ABSTRACT c. THIS PAGE unclassified unclassified unclassified			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 11	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON

THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR CRISIS: A STRATEGY OF CONDITIONAL ENGAGEMENT

The strategic threat. The North Korean nuclear weapons program is a significant strategic threat to the United States and East Asia. The US Government should adopt a strategy of conditional engagement with Pyongyang in order to prevail upon North Korea (DPRK) to curtail and ultimately abandon its nuclear weapons program.

North Korea's nuclear weapons program. North Korea has long been suspected of having a nuclear weapons program, despite being a signatory to the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the 1992 Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. On 21 October 1994, Pyongyang entered into an "Agreed Framework" with the United States, in which it agreed to "freeze" its nuclear program and allow international inspections in return for fuel oil and "proliferation-resistant" nuclear reactors.¹ As of September 2003, however, North Korea had abrogated the 1994 Agreed Framework, withdrawn from the NPT, and forced international inspectors to leave the country.² The CIA, in a report submitted to Congress on 19 November 2002, asserted that North Korea had "one or possibly two weapons using plutonium it produced prior to 1992" and had "continued its nuclear weapons program."³ In April 2003, North Korea publicly admitted to having "a nuclear weapons capability" but proposed to "dismantle its nuclear facilities, allow inspections, and curb ballistic missile exports in return for a U.S. non-aggression pledge, establishment of diplomatic relations, and a commitment not to obstruct North Korean economic relations."⁴ On 2 October 2003,

North Korea announced it had finished reprocessing spent fuel rods into plutonium and thereby had “nuclear deterrence.”⁵

North Korea’s justification for its nuclear weapons program. Pyongyang Radio (KCNA) on 12 May 2003 blamed the United States for forcing North Korea to develop nuclear weapons. “The United States,” KCNA reported, “is wholly responsible for today’s aggravated confrontation between the DPRK and the United States and for fostering a grave situation in which a crisis of nuclear war is created.”⁶ According to KCNA, both North and South Korea pledged not to develop or manufacture nuclear weapons when they signed the Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula on 20 January 1992. Previously, North Korea had signed the NPT to insure the removal of nuclear weapons—i.e., US nuclear weapons-- from the Korean peninsula. In 1987 North Korea demanded that the United States remove its nuclear weapons from Korea and cancel “operational plans regarding the use of nuclear weapons.”⁷ The United States, however, continued its NCND [neither confirm nor deny] policy, “under which it neither confirms nor denies the deployment of nuclear weapons.”⁸ KCNA accused the United States of deploying nuclear weapons in South Korea “as a means to threaten” North Korea.⁹ Since then North Korea has sought direct talks with the United States and a non-aggression pact but President Bush’s “extreme hostile policy toward the DPRK was more overtly manifested when he designated” North Korea “as [part] of the axis of evil.”¹⁰ As a result of the US Government’s “vicious hostile policy toward the DPRK,” KCNA declared, the DPRK has chosen to “nullify” the 1992 Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.¹¹ KCNA concluded, “The bloody lesson of the war in Iraq for the world is that only when a country has physical deterrent forces and

massive military deterrent forces that are capable of overwhelmingly defeating any attack by state-of-the-art weapons, can it prevent war and defend its independence and national security.”¹²

The East Asian environment. North Korea’s defiant stance on nuclear weapons has raised tensions not only with Washington, but also among its East Asian neighbors South Korea, China, Japan and Russia, all of whom have engaged in multilateral talks with Pyongyang on the crisis since August 2003:

--South Korea wants to eliminate the North Korean nuclear threat but fears potential U.S. military intervention.

--China advocates a North Korea without nuclear weapons and has strongly supported multilateral talks to avoid a military conflict.

--Japan seeks to remove the nuclear threat from North Korea but is worried about North Korea’s Nodong missile.

--Russia has assumed the role of intermediary between North Korea and the United States to promote its interests in the Far East.¹³

The U.S. national interest. It is in the national interest of the United States that North Korea dismantle its nuclear weapons program. Otherwise America will be faced with a dangerous threat from a deeply hostile adversary whose nuclear weapons, launched on Nodong missiles, would expose the United States and its allies Japan and South Korea to massive destruction. American interests are also threatened by North Korea’s proliferation of nuclear technology to rogue states that are unfriendly to the United States. Washington needs to make these points clear not only to Pyongyang but

also to North Korea's neighbors, all of whom would suffer if a violent confrontation were to break out between the United States and North Korea on the Korean peninsula.

The U.S. strategic goal. The strategy of the United States should aim to prevail upon Pyongyang to curtail and eventually eliminate its nuclear weapons program. Such a plan should maintain the current US economic embargo against North Korea but should rule out military force or coercion against the DPRK.

--Unless threatened with imminent attack, the United States should not launch a preventive military strike against North Korea to force Pyongyang to end its nuclear weapons program. Not only would military action spiral into a long war, cause huge American casualties and provoke Pyongyang into using its nuclear weapons, it would alienate our allies and outrage North Korea's neighbors, especially China and Russia, neither of whom would benefit from a US/DPRK confrontation. With an enormous military and backward economic infrastructure, North Korea could absorb huge poundings by American bombers and impose unacceptable losses on invading US forces.

--The United States should also refrain from adopting a more coercive strategy to compel North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program. North Korea has already survived 50 years of US-imposed economic isolation; a US naval blockade or similar effort to force Pyongyang to shut down its nuclear program will only embolden the North Koreans to expand production of nuclear weapons regardless of the consequences faced by the people of North Korea. Despite Pyongyang's low standing in the world, an aggressive, increasingly belligerent strategy by Washington would inflame world opinion against the United States, win undeserved sympathy for North Korea, and encourage the

Kim Jong-il regime to maintain its bellicose, confrontational stance against America.

Backed into a corner, North Korea might even launch an attack on South Korea.

Strategy of conditional engagement. While maintaining its current economic embargo against North Korea, the United States should adopt a strategy of conditional engagement with Pyongyang to resolve the nuclear crisis. Conditional engagement should include an acceptance by Washington to conduct direct, face-to-face negotiations with the Kim Jong-il regime. While this concession will be seen in some US political circles as appeasement and capitulation to North Korean blackmail, direct talks will assuage Pyongyang's sense of inferiority, reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula and win international support for the United States. Agreeing to negotiate does not oblige Washington to surrender or make concessions; it just means the United States has agreed to talk. Direct negotiations with Pyongyang will also provide the United States a forum to acquire more information on North Korea's nuclear developments and gauge more accurately North Korean intentions regarding the future of its nuclear weapons program.

While conducting direct talks, the United States should offer North Korea diplomatic recognition, a non-aggression pact, and an end to economic isolation, in return for an agreement by Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear weapons program and open the Yongbyon and other secret nuclear facilities to international inspection, led by US arms inspectors and the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

--While diplomatic recognition of a rogue Communist outlaw regime like North Korea will be distasteful to many Americans, Pyongyang can justifiably complain that US diplomatic non-recognition is unfair, since both China and Russia, North Korea's historical allies, have long since recognized the Government of South Korea.

--A US/DPRK non-aggression pact will help reduce tensions on the Korean peninsula and reassure South Korea and North Korea's neighbors. The United States, however, should not agree to include its NCND policy as part of the negotiating agenda with North Korea; instead, US negotiators will need to remind the North Koreans time and again that North Korea's archenemy South Korea possesses no nuclear weapons.

--Ending North Korea's economic embargo will alleviate the plight of North Korea's starving people and win the United States considerable support and legitimacy in world public opinion.

Under no circumstances, however, should the United States provide North Korea diplomatic recognition, a non-aggression treaty, or an end to the economic embargo until Pyongyang has provided unmistakable evidence it is dismantling its nuclear weapons program.

Enhanced intelligence collection. To ascertain the plans and intentions of the North Korean leadership and monitor the progress of the North Korean nuclear weapons program, the US Government will need to expand intelligence collection against North Korea. As the CIA has publicly warned, the North Korean nuclear program, "given the North's closed society and the obvious covert nature of the program, remains a difficult intelligence collection target."¹⁴ Additional resources will need to be given the US Intelligence Community to collect on this highly compartmented and reclusive target.

Public diplomacy. The United States will need to make aggressive use of public diplomacy to educate South Korea and other countries bordering North Korea on the progress of its talks with Pyongyang. Such a campaign would highlight North Korean transgressions and compliances and American efforts to curtail North Korean nuclear

weapons development. In its public statements, however, the US Government should employ non-threatening, non-inflammatory language, lest the North Koreans, who are unduly sensitive to any suggestion of hostility, will be compelled to ratchet up the crisis. For example, the US Government should quietly cease labeling North Korea as part of the “axis of evil.” In addition, using the Voice of America (VOA), the United States should attempt to provide the North and South Korean peoples with a balanced and objective account of its engagement with Pyongyang. Given the extremely closed nature of North Korean society and the totalitarian control exercised by the Kim Jong-il regime, however, it is highly unlikely that VOA broadcasts will have a major influence on the North Korean people, nor will VOA broadcasts likely reach their intended audience in the northern part of the peninsula. But a moderate US Government public diplomatic campaign that focuses purely on the facts will at least reassure North Korea’s neighbors that the United States will not engage in hostile, precipitate actions.

International consultations. The United States will need to keep South Korea, the United Nations, and the countries bordering North Korea informed of the progress of its direct talks with Pyongyang. The United States should also provide strong support to the IAEA in its efforts to monitor and conduct on-site inspections of the North Korean nuclear facilities. Active US support to the IAEA will not only signal to Pyongyang that the United States is acting in concert with other responsible powers, it will also enhance Washington’s legitimacy in the international arena. While the United States should encourage and support multilateral discussions on the North Korean question, such as those now taking place among the United States, China, Russia, South Korea and Japan, it should focus primarily on its direct talks with the Kim Jong-il regime.

Consequences: No immediate results expected. The United States will need to exercise uncharacteristic patience in dealing with the North Koreans. Negotiations with North Korea will take a long time; results will not be immediately forthcoming nor will Pyongyang agree to dismantle its nuclear program any time soon. North Korea will use its direct talks with Washington, as it has done in other forums, to sow discord, make accusations and threats, employ deception, and be obnoxious and uncooperative. But the United States must not forget that North Korea remains isolated, a pariah even among its friends with a long history of international roguery. Time and patience will take care of this problem. The Kim Jong-il regime will not last forever. Repeatedly the North Koreans must be told that unless they agree to dismantle their nuclear weapons program, little progress can be made in other areas. The United States should never recognize North Korea, or end North Korea's economic isolation, or sign a non-aggression pact with Pyongyang, until this key requirement is met. If North Korea refuses to abandon its nuclear weapons program and begins to offer threatening gestures to the United States and its neighbors, only then should Washington consider more drastic measures, such as a naval blockade, a covert action campaign or even military force, to compel North Korea to behave itself.

NOTES

¹ Victor Cha and David C. Kang, “The Korea Crisis,” Foreign Policy, September-October 2003, <<http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/misc.php>> (27 September 2003), “North Korea Poses a Direct Nuclear Threat to the United States.”

² Cha and Kang, “The Korea Crisis.”

³ “North Korean Nuclear Weapons: CIA Estimate for Congress,” 19 November 2002, Federation of American Scientists (FAS), Weapons of Mass Destruction, WMD Around the World, 24 April 2003, <<http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/nuk/cia111902.html>> (27 September and 24 October 2003), Nuclear Weapons Program.

⁴ Phillip C. Saunders, “What to Expect from the Six-Party Talks on the Korean Nuclear Crisis,” Monterey Institute of International Studies, 25 August 2003, <<http://cns.miis.edu/pubs/week/030825.htm>> (27 September 2003).

⁵ Anthony Faiola, “N. Korea Claims Nuclear Advance,” Washington Post, 3 October 2003, sec. A.

⁶ “North Korea: KCNA ‘Detailed Report’ on Failure of Denuclearization,” 12 May 2003, Federation of American Scientists (FAS), Weapons of Mass Destruction, WMD Around the World, 24 April 2003, <<http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/dprk/nuke/dprk051203.html>> (27 September and 24 October 2003), FBIS Translated Text.

⁷ KCNA “Detailed Report.”

⁸ KCNA “Detailed Report.”

⁹ KCNA “Detailed Report.”

¹⁰ KCNA “Detailed Report.”

¹¹ KCNA “Detailed Report.”

¹² KCNA “Detailed Report.”

¹³ Saunders, “What to Expect from the Six-Party Talks on the Korean Nuclear Crisis,” Monterey Institute of International Studies.

¹⁴ Federation of American Scientists (FAS), Weapons of Mass Destruction, WMD Around the World, 24 April 2003, “CIA Estimate for Congress,” Uranium Enrichment.

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